

**Appropriations Committee
Health Subcommittee
February 24, 2022**

**Public Hearing on:
House Bill 5037 AAC the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30th, 2023
(Department of Developmental, Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services)**

Good afternoon/evening, Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Miner, Representative France and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Erin Gasparini and I am the Chief Program Officer at Kuhn Employment Opportunities. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the state budget.

I have worked for Kuhn for more than 16 years and in that time I have witnessed our dedicated staff assist individuals with disabilities to reach goals that many people felt were unachievable. Our mission is to support individuals by providing day and employment services to those with Mental Illness and Intellectual Disabilities. We have been in business since 1962 and in that time we have seen so many participants reach their goals to obtain employment in the community, work as part of a group supported employment program which cleans many state facilities in CT, or improve their daily living and social skills allowing them to be more independent in their lives.

I want to thank you for the 4% Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) for community nonprofits that you fought to include in last year's budget. I'm here tonight to ask you to honor the long term plan to address underfunding of community nonprofits and increase funding this year by an additional \$461 million, or 8% in total for FY23.

This funding is needed now more than ever. Without it, we risk destabilizing our state's community service delivery system which has been upended by the pressures of COVID-19 and an exponential increase in the need for service in our communities.

Our staff are committed to the individuals we serve. The level of responsibility for our staff is significant and we are asking them all to do more and more each day. I know many of our staff are faced with decisions to make more money to support their families, and are considering a move to other industries and leaving behind a field and the PEOPLE that they are so passionate about helping. This past year we have been faced with an unprecedented staffing shortage. Over 85% of interviews that are scheduled, fail to show up. This staffing shortage forces us to cancel services for individuals who are the most in need. This causes strain on residential providers and families. Every day as we look at our schedule and find ourselves short staffed we have to make changes so that the coverage is in place. Kuhn staff, including coordinators, managers and directors are being pulled from their responsibilities to make sure coverage needs are addressed. This means that vans can't be serviced, new work opportunities can't be developed, reports and communications are delayed, professional development and training is deferred, and all staff are left feeling overwhelmed. However the ones who are suffering most by this change is our participants. These changes can cause significant behaviors in participants who have had trauma in their lives. It causes them to feel abandoned and brings up significant emotions. Our participants should be in a stable, safe, and secure environment. I receive at least one new referral nearly every day. Families who are looking for placements for their

son or daughter as they look to graduate out of high school. While I would love to open our doors to each and every one of them, our limited resources prevent me from doing that. The lack of adequate funding, for over a decade from the State of Connecticut to providers, has a direct, negative impact on the lives of the people who we are charged with protecting.

The increase in this year's budget, while very much appreciated, has quickly been absorbed by rising costs. Over the last year, inflation rose by almost six percent, surpassing the COLA in the current year's budget.

Funding for agencies such as Kuhn must be increased, not only in order for us to pay a living wage for our dedicated staff, but for us to attract exemplary new staff into this field. In 2021 we were given an increase in funding to raise the pay rates for direct care staff. While this was a good start the pay rate in other industries also continue to increase. On my way to work today I saw that McDonalds is starting employees at \$15/hour while other businesses far exceed the \$16.50 that we pay. Other agency costs continue to rise for things such as gas, vehicles, and general program supplies. Nonprofits can't pass along these increased costs to our customers as retail and restaurant establishments are doing. The state of CT must step up and invest in nonprofits. Failure to do so should be considered neglect as it harms our most vulnerable population.

Please support please support the following proposals by Governor Lamont from the American Rescue Plan Act for DDS:

- \$5 million in FY23 for infrastructure improvements for public and privately-owned camps.
- \$5 million in FY23 to provide additional recreational and leisure opportunities to facilitate socialization and connections as the state emerges from the pandemic.

Finally, while the Governor's proposed budget offers new behavioral health services and initiatives, for which we are thankful, **it does not provide support to existing programs that are struggling to keep up with the demand for services.** These new, proposed services are necessary and I ask that you please support the programs proposed in the Governor's budget, including:

- Expanding Mobile Crisis services to be available 24/7 using ARPA funding, which will be important especially as the state rolls out 9-8-8.
- 26 new community placements from CVH and Whiting
- Funding to place peer support specialists in Connecticut's 12 busiest hospitals. This will improve the connection to services of people who are hospitalized with a mental health crisis or who go to the emergency room. It is important to note, however, that this program will increase referrals to existing community programs, and increase in demand which is not funded in the proposed budget.